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Tar, asbestos discoveries delay project

■ Cleanup of area along Nashua River behind schedule; EPA doubles budget to $2.6 million.

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NASHUA – Cleanup crews originally scheduled to begin tackling the remaining asbestos contamination near the former Johns-Manville plant late last week probably won't begin the project until sometime next week, regulators said Monday.

"They're a little bit behind schedule," conceded Charles Knox, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Services in Concord. The project entails removing contaminated sediments along 800 feet of Nashua River shoreline behind 40 Bridge St.

Knox blamed the setback on unforeseen delays triggered by the discovery last month of higher-than-expected levels of asbestos as well as the presence of coal tar in riverbed sediments.

Those discoveries prompted further testing, which together with heavy rains that have raised the river nine feet above normal levels, delayed the site work scheduled for late last week. The findings also prompted the federal Environmental Protection Agency to double the budget for the project from $1.3 million to $2.6 million.

Regulators are still awaiting test results that will reveal the extent of the coal tar problem, Knox said. He characterized the finding as nothing unusual for an industrial region.

"We've had situations like this all over the country," he said, pointing to ongoing coal-tar removal projects in Concord and Laconia as area examples. The root of the problem dates back to the turn of the century, Knox explained, when "gas was the hydrocarbon of preference to burn in homes," and its manufacture led to the ample production of the byproduct coal tar.

Knox speculated that the coal tar had sat at the bottom of the river "for decades and decades." He declined to name who might be responsible for the pollution. "We're still exploring exactly where it came from," he said.

While state and federal environmental officials await further information on the coal-tar problem, it's likely that crews will still begin clearing the site of vegetation and debris early next week, with removal of all the trees along the targeted area of the embankment to follow.

Crews will then begin construction of a cofferdam, a temporary watertight enclosure built on the river that will provide access to the contaminated sediment.

The EPA has linked the asbestos to wastewater running from a discharge pipe out of the former Johns-Manville facility, where asbestos products were produced throughout most of this century until 1985. A known carcinogen, asbestos is hazardous to the lungs when inhaled in airborne particles. The factory itself was demolished early last year after being taken over by the city.

Asked about the need for chopping down what he conceded would be "quite a few trees" during the riverbed cleanup, Erin Heskett, a community involvement coordinator in the EPA Region 1 office in Boston, said the move was necessary to give crews and their heavy equipment access to the site.

Sometime later this year, possibly November, according to Heskett, workers will begin implementing erosion control programs and eventually replant the area with native trees and shrubs cataloged by Army Corps of Engineers surveyors who have studied the vegetation along the riverbank in recent weeks.

For Heskett, this month's delays were not surprising. "(The timeline) has changed so much because a lot of different players are involved, and it's a fairly delicate job," Heskett said. "We have to make sure that everybody's happy and we're doing the right thing."

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